

Memories
of
Days
in
the
Civilian Conservation Corps.



By

M.L. "Pete" Leath



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Written in February 2004

"I propose to create a Civilian Conservation Corps to be used in simple work... more important, however, than the material gains will be the moral and spiritual value of such work."

Franklin D. Roosevelt March 9, 1933

Several years ago, one of my grand-daughters asked me, "Paw-paw, who were the C.C.C. Boys that I have heard you speak of?" Later on while at the annual C.C.C. reunion, one of the men said that while his daughter was attending Jacksonville University; her class was discussing the Depression Years. When the subject of the Civilian Conservation Corps was brought up, she was the only student there that had ever heard of the C.C.C. Boys. After hearing this, I decided to write down what I know about the corps for my grand-children to remember.

First of all, it was a plan of the new president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who was elected in 1932; at a time when our country was in a Great Depression. Unemployment was high and economic chaos had crippled our nation. He brought the 73rd Congress into emergency session on March 9, 1933 to hear and authorize his program. His plan was to save our natural resources and at the same time give our young men a chance to get off the streets and give them a job. It would help the economy because a mandatory \$25 a month of the men's wages was sent home to their families while the men received \$5 a month for themselves. It would help save our natural resources as the men stopped soil erosion by planting trees, building roads, bridges, parks, and etc..

From Roosevelt's inauguration day on March 4, 1933 to the first boy to be enrolled into the C. C. C. on April 7th, only 37 days had passed. Senate Bill # 598 was introduced on March 27. It passed though both houses of Congress on its first reading and was on the President's desk to be signed on March 31, taking just four days.

As to the economy, the effects of the mandatory monthly allotment of \$25, sent to the families of the boys, was felt in towns and cities across our nation. More than \$72,000,00 in allotments was making life a little easier for the people at home. As the families made about \$5,000 a month in purchases of groceries, produce, and etc., some local businesses were helped from becoming failures.

Not only were there C.C.C. Camps for the young men, soon there were camps for the veterans of both the Spanish- American War and World War One. All of these veterans were under the officers of the Army, Navy, Coast Guard, or Marines while they were in camp. But when they boarded the trucks to go to work in the parks, etc., they came under the officers of the Department of the Interior. Many of these young men married local ladies and remained in Fort

Payne, while some moved back to their homes in other areas. I remember three officers who married local ladies, they were: Col. Barksdale, Lt. R. C. Robertson and a Lt. Davis, whose first name I can not remember.

There were also camps set up for Black Americans and for American Indians. The camps were identified as follows:

S. P.-----for building parks
S.E.S.-----for soil erosion work
F.-----for forestry Work (planting trees, etc.)
T.V.A.-----for work around Wheeler Dam and
Guntersville Dam Reservoirs

All of the camps were equipped to fight forest fires. Some of the camps located near National Forrest, such as Company 468 at Cheaha, had a system. The men in Barracks #1 and #2 would have week-end passes while the men in Barracks #3 and #4 would stay in camp on fire duty. The next week Barrack #3 and #4 had week-end passes and #1 and #2 stayed in camp, so there was always crews on fire duty.

All of the camps had a chaplain for religious services. There was a dispensary for medical emergencies and sickness. A trained orderly could take care of small cuts and any small ailments, a first aid station so to speak. If it was anything serious, a local doctor was called in or the patient could be sent to the Fort McCellan Army Hospital. The orderly at Co. 472 was Mack Faulk.

Each camp had a mess hall with the kitchen at one end of the building. The cooks were trained at a bakery school. They all carried a rateing of Leader or Asst. Leader. The Leader was paid \$45 a month and the Asst. leader was paid \$36 a month. All the enrollees had to work K. P. Duty on a rotating system. We waited on tables, washed dishes, pots, pans, and etc. The officers had their own building where they ate (the same food the enrollees ate). There was an orderly who waited on their table and brought their food to their building. Here in Fort Payne at Company 472, Claud Arber was the orderly. All of the food was furnished by the Army. When the enrollees were out working, food was taken to them by an Army truck.

Each camp had a library, a gym, and a canteen or PX. (I worked several weeks in the PX when Elam was out sick. I was paid \$45 a month while working in the canteen.) Almost all the camps had a basketball team, a baseball team, and a boxing team. These camp teams competed against teams from other camps.

Each camp usually had four barracks, with one barrack divided in half for the cooks because they had to get up early to start breakfast. Each barrack had a barrack leader to see that it was kept clean and orderly. Each barrack had two wood burning heaters for heating. It was the leader's job to see that someone was assigned to the job of keeping the heaters going (keeping wood in and etc.) The bunks were lined up along the walls with a walk way down the middle.

The bathhouse and latrine was located in the back of the barracks with several shower stalls in each one. The water was heated by a coal or wood

burning furnace. There was a latrine orderly who helped keep the furnace going and kept the bathhouse clean.

There were opportunities for the men to learn wood-work making cabinets, furniture, picture frames, and etc. Many learned to work with metal in the Black Smith Shop. There were more than 400,000 young men who were taught to read and write through the Educational Programs offered by the C.C.C. (I was paid \$6 extra a month to help a Mr. Wilson, who was in charge of the library, teach some of the men in my camp to read. I would teach two hours two nights a week)

Not many people are aware that the C.C.C. also had camps for girls. They were taught to sew, type, cook, keep books, and etc. The girls were paid \$5 a week but they had to pay for their food out of this amount. The name of the girl's camp was T.E.R.A., an abbreviation for The Emergency Relief Association. These girl's camps were the personal project of the President's wife, Eleanor. The supervisor of these girl's camps was Miss Marion Tucker.

As for myself, I enrolled into the C.C.C. at the old DeKalb County Court House in the office of a Miss Sinard. You enrolled for a period of 6 months but most of us stayed longer. After enrolling several of us left Fort Payne in an Army truck making a stop at Colbran to pick up Gad Killian and then on to Collinsville and Attalla to pick up more boys. We were taken to Fort McCellan where we were examined, inoculated, and assigned to camps. Some of the boys were sent to camps in the state of Washington, some to Mississippi and the rest were assigned to camps within Alabama. I asked to be assigned to a local camp but they were assigning me to go to Washington. Fortunately, I was wearing my High School Letterman's sweater. A Sgt. Scott Key saw it and asked me if I could play baseball. When I answered, "yes sir", he instructed me to tell the people in charge of the assignments that Sgt. Key said to send me to Cheaha Company 468. That's how I came to be assigned to Cheaha Camp, Company 468, near Montford, Alabama. Two other boys from Fort Payne, Hugh Long and Houston Gipson, went in and told the same story that Sgt. Key wanted them assigned to Company 468. and although neither one of them could play ball. they got away with it and was assigned to Company 468 too. Company 468 was a state park camp located at the foot of Cheaha Mountain. We were issued uniforms and work clothes, assigned to a barrack, and the next day we were assigned to a work crew. My first work was a Rock Handler, helping to build the rock tower and building on the mountain. On occasion, I was taken out to Horn Tower (metal tower) to be a look out for forest fires. I would be supplied with water and food (peanut butter, bread, canned peaches etc.) Later I transferred to the Tractor Crew. We built the road up the eastern side of Mount Cheaha from Ashland. I operated a road grader pulled by the tractor. This was my job for several months until I transferred to Company 472 located in Fort Payne. I felt sort of bad transferring so soon since Sgt. Key had kept me from being sent to Washington but I sure wanted to get closer to home. Any enrollee could ask for a transfer near his home at his own expense. Most of the time, these transfers

were granted especially if the desired camp was in the same district. Our District, District D covered Alabama and parts of Mississippi and Tennessee.

Company 472 was organized at Fort McCellan on May 21, 1933 where it remained until June 27, 1933 when it was moved to Chula, Georgia. Later that year in November, the Company was moved to Fort Payne through the efforts of Congressman Allgood (who had a home in Mentone) and Fort Payne lawyer Charles Scott. Congressman Allgood contacted Mr. Scott and asked if Fort Payne would like to have a C. C. C camp. Mr. Scott contacted the city officials and others who helped in obtaining the property for the camp here in Fort Payne. The camp was located at the South Y where the DeKalb Plaza is presently located.

In April of 1934, the project was changed to SP5, Department of the Interior and work was begun on DeSoto State Park. Mr. Edward Ladd surveyed the park which consisted of 950 acres with T. B. Jacoway and Mr. Cadman as helpers.

Some of the first work by the enrollees was building a fence around the entire park area. Future work included foot trails, 8 miles of roads, 10 cabins, a lodge, a care taker's home, picnic shelters, drainage culverts, a bridge, and etc. World War 2 broke out before the work on the bridge was completed. It remains unfinished to this day.

My first work in Company 472 was in a crew sloping the banks on road sides to prevent erosion. Later on I worked with several different crews. In the rock quarry, located in DeSoto State Park, we used wedges to drive into the seams of the rock to pry it up so it could be cut with a hammer and chisel. The boys then used smaller tools to trim and shape the rock into the desired size and shape to build the Lodge, Picnic Shelter, culverts, cabins, the care taker's home, and the bridge. At the time I was working there, we did not use a star drill; we only used wedges to get the rock separated. I understand there are some star drills in the quarry at this time. They must have been used after I was discharged. I also worked as a Jack hammer operator cutting the ditches for the water lines to the buildings in the park. This crew was also charged with using dynamite to clear the rock out from the ditch lines.

Eventually an opening came up on the tractor crew. Since I had experience on such a crew with Company 468, they assigned me to this crew where I operated a grater pulled behind a tractor. I put the elevation on all the curves as well as grating and crowning the road up to the road leading to Miller's Dam. Following the bulldozer, we cut roads north of Wade Gap to the road leading to Miller's Dam.

One of the advantages of working on the Tractor Crew was when the tractor needed repairs or there was no road work to do, I could go out with any of the other crews I wanted to. In the course of time, I worked with the Slope Crew (sloping road banks with pick and shovel), on the Carpentry Crew (making different kinds of repairs to the cabins under the supervision of Mr. Cox), or in the quarry.

The last work assignment I had in the C.C.C. was being in charge of greasing and fueling the gas shovel, which I was learning to operate under the shovel's operator, Mr. Hale. The gas shovel was being used to widen Tutwilder Gap from the top of the mountain down to the road that connected Mentone and Valley Head (Highway 117). I was discharged just before this job was completed.

Camp Commanders of Company 472 that I served under were: a Captain Butler and 1st Lt. Hame. When they transferred out, Captain N. A. Athanson became the commanding officer with 1st. Lt. R. C. Robertson and Lt. Davis serving as Junior Officers. M. C. Scales was in charge of the Educational Program which consisted mostly of classes for reading, and writing. However, classes were also available for typing and book keeping.

While working in the park, our Project Superintendent was Mr. F. F. Berry. Some of the foremen that I remember was Mr. Patterson, Mr. Cadman, Mr. Culbertson, Mr. Radford, Mr. Elbert Hansard and Mr. George Cox. Both Hansard and Cox were local men. Mr. Hansard was in charge of the Metal Shop in the park. Mr. Cox was in charge of carpentry at the park, building the cabins and etc. There were more foremen but I can not remember their names.

The C.C.C. enrollees built nearly all the furniture including beds, tables, chairs and cabinets for all the original cabins as well as for the care takers house. The first Care Taker, later known as Superintendents, was a Mr. Getz , followed by Woodrow Wood, followed by J. O. Evans. Mr. Evans had been a local enrollee in the C.C.C. He became park Superintendent in 1955 and served in that capacity until his death.

Every day a chow truck was sent out to bring the boys lunch. For a few summers, there was a Mr. Culpepper who owned a farm in the nearby Fisher Community. He would follow the truck and sell us a canteen cup of buttermilk and 2 or 3 corn bread muffins for 5 or 10 cents. I don't remember the exact amount but I believe it was ten cents.

Just north of the top of Price Gap (called Wade Gap now), going north toward Mentone is a rock formation on the right side of the road. The shape of this formation is like a pilgrim's hat. I use to sit on top of this rock and eat my lunch. We called it DeSoto's Hat This rock formation is still there today.

One summer when T.V.A. was clearing the trees out in order for the Guntersville Lake to be formed, another enrollee named Fargart and myself were sent over to South Saulty just below Langston to work. We took a Allis Chamler tractor with us to pull trees that had been cut and partially fell into the creek. Once we pulled them out of the water, our crew would saw them into logs. When the logs were loaded onto trucks, they were hauled back to camp and sawed into lumber for use at the camp and the park. Taylor Goza, a local man, was the sawer and in charge of the saw mill which was located near the branch crossing going onto the current DeKalb Plaza. Mr. Goza was known as one of the \$70 men. These men were Asst. Foremen who were paid \$70 a month, hence the name \$70 men.

There was a enrollee named Ed Payne from Jefferson County that worked in the quarry. He cut out a stone in the shape of the State of Alabama to be

placed in the floor of one of the picnic shelters. It was loaded on a truck to transport it to the shelter but the truck hit a bump and the rock broke in two pieces. Not to be defeated, he cut out the second rock, got it over to the shelter and just before they got it down on the ground, it broke again. Finally on the third try, he successfully got the rock cut, transported and down into the floor of the shelter. He took such great pride in this project. This shelter is located in what is now the Primitive Camping Area.

There were only two men that were killed from Company 472 while I was there. One was inside a tool shed when lightning ran in on the phone line and the other was killed when the truck that was carrying him back to camp, wrecked.

I am proud to have been a member of the C.C.C. I made many life long friends. We had an annual C.C.C. Reunion every July for many years where we got together and remembered old times. Last year (2004) I was the only one able to attend. There are not many of us left now. Time has caught up with us. I hope you will enjoy knowing more about the C.C.C.

Did you know that the Civilian Conservation Corps:

- 1- built 46,854 Bridges
- 2- developed over 800 State parks
- 3- built 4,622 Fish Ponds
- 4- restored 3,980 Historic Structures
- 5- installed over 5000 miles of water supply lines
- 6- improved 3,462 Beaches
- 7- built 1,865 Drinking Fountains
- 8- built 27,191 miles of Fences
- 9- built 204 Lodges and Museums
- 10- spent 201,739 man days fighting coal fires saving billions of tons of coal
- 11- built 8,065 wells and pump houses
- 12- gave over nearly 225,000 Veterans of World War 1 an opportunity to rebuild their lives by joining the C.C.C.
- 13- had more than 85,000 American Indians working in the program
- 14- built over 3,116 Look Out Towers
- 15- planted over 3 Billion trees
- 16- taught more than 400,000 enrollees how to read and write through the Corps' Educational Programs

Did you know that actor, Walter Matthau, served in C.C.C. during 1939-1940?

DeSoto State Park celebrates 50th anniversary of dedication

By Linda Smith
Staff Correspondent

FORT PAYNE — "Hello, you're so and so. I remember you. You retired recently, didn't you?"

These were all questions and comments approximately 50 men of Company 472 of the Civilian Conservation Corps had for each other Saturday at the 50th anniversary of DeSoto State Park.

The Civilian Conservation Corps began construction on DeSoto State Park on April 13, 1934. The park was dedicated five years later on May 24, 1939.

Gulf State Park was the first park in the state to be dedicated, and DeSoto State Park was the second.

Pete Leath, a retired fire chief for the city of Fort Payne, was one of the CCC's who helped to construct the park.

Leath said, "I was raised in Fort Payne, but I went to Camp Cheaha first, then transferred back to the company in Fort Payne."

Leath said he began work in the summer of 1936 with the CCC, and when he came back to Fort Payne to work on the park, some of the construction had already begun.

"Some of the cabins were already built, and many of the roads had been cut. They were working on the lodge when I came back."

Leath said he worked with the road crew for a while, and when machinery was broken, he would help to fix it.

"I also worked some with the rock crew," he added.

Leath said the rock quarry was in layer form, and the crew would separate layers of rock and then cut the rocks by hand.

A big part of the park is built from rocks cut by the quarry crew. Many of the rocks look to be almost perfectly cut. Bridges, cabins, picnic shelters and parts of the lodge all contain original rock, hand-cut by men of the CCC.

"The men of the CCC worked for

one dollar per day. We got to keep five dollars per month, and the remaining twenty five dollars was sent to our parents," Leath said.

The average age of the men of the CCC was 17, 18 and 19. Leath himself was 17 when he began work with the CCC.

"I think the CCC was the best program that was ever instigated by the United States government," he said.

"It helped put money in circulation during the depression, and I've heard many of the boys say it put food on their family's table during that time.

"I think the park has had a tremendous impact on the area in the years it has been here."

Park Manager Talmadge Butler said, "The day has been very nice. We had more attend the activities today than we had anticipated."

Today will conclude the festivi-

ties planned in conjunction with the park's anniversary.

The celebration is in conjunction with the 50th anniversary of the state parks division and the Alabama Reunion



Greetings from the President of the United States

I welcome the opportunity to extend a greeting to the men who constitute the Civilian Conservation Corps. It is my belief that what is being accomplished will conserve our national resources, create future national wealth and prove of moral and spiritual value, not only to those of you who are taking part, but to the rest of the country as well.

You young men who are enrolled in this work are to be congratulated. It is my honest conviction that what you are doing in the way of constructive service will bring you, personally and individually, returns the value of which it is difficult to estimate.

Physically fit, as demonstrated by the examinations you took before entering the camps, the clean life and hard work, in which you are engaged, cannot fail to help your physical condition. You should emerge from this experience, strong and rugged and ready for entrance into the ranks of industry, better equipped than before.

I want to congratulate you on the opportunity you have, and to extend to you my appreciation for the hearty cooperation which you have given this movement, so vital a step in the nation's fight for progress, and to wish you a pleasant, wholesome and constructive stay in the CCC.

-Franklin D. Roosevelt

